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Women as Co-operators

Gillian Lonergan and Jan Myers

This short paper is prompted by a booklet produced by Pat Stuttard to celebrate the International Year of Co-operation in 2012, and some of the women who feature in the history of the co-operative movement — “the dreamers and adventurers” (Rowbotham, 2010: 3). This review cannot be a complete account of women’s voices, experiences, and actions and there are many names missing from the account below — women such as Jane Addams who set up Hull House, a settlement community in North America and who worked alongside John Dewey; Eleanor Rathbone, or Elizabeth Fry — Quaker and prison reform campaigner. Nor does it mention Sarah Reddish who, at the age of 11, became a silk weaver and was later active in the Manchester suffrage movement, or the women co-operators who worked to provide aid during the Spanish Civil War, so well depicted in some of the paintings by British artists in the recent touring exhibition ‘Conflict and Conscience: British artists and the Spanish civil war’ (Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, and Laing Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015). It does, however, provide a springboard for further exploration and consideration of women then and now as activists, as peacemakers and as co-operators.

In 2012, to celebrate the International Year of Co-operation, Pat Stuttard — Midlands Co-operative Society — produced a wonderful booklet showcasing women whom she says, in the introduction, are among the “first in some stage of women’s involvement in co-operation”. In the same year, Polly Toynbee speaking at a Gender Forum at Co-operatives United, suggested that women are “natural co-operators”, but that women in the co-operative movement have an element of fatalism in believing that “men in top positions are considered the norm” (Barker and Peart, 2012). What follows is a tribute to some familiar, and not so familiar, women co-operators, and provides an interesting timeline of involvement and, not always acknowledged, influence.

For women in the nineteenth century, philanthropy and reform marked a shift from women’s occupations in the home to social action in the public sphere. Middle-class women’s engagement in such endeavours was also seen as the nurturing of a “political identity of first-wave feminism” (Livesey, 1999: 5). The involvement of women in suffrage and anti-slavery movements across the globe, as well as promotion of employment opportunities for women is seen as part of this nascent feminist activity; some might argue that this has also excluded, in some instances, working class women and that the inter-section of race, class, and gender can often be underplayed or seen as unproblematic. Yeo (2002: 8) however, describes the Owenite co-operators and socialists of the 1820s and 1830s of which women were a part, as ‘working class’. It is beyond the scope of this review to explore these issues in depth and there are useful published works that provide a rich background and discussion (see for example Blaszak, 2000; and Rowbotham, 1975, 2010). Instead, in the following paragraphs, using Stuttard’s booklet as a springboard, cameos of significant women contributors to the co-operative and labour movement are provided.

Anna Wheeler (born 1785), born in Ireland and moved to London in 1815, was one of the first women in England to speak openly about women’s rights at public meetings. She taught herself French and was familiar with the writings of many French political thinkers (Jenkins, 2015). She is acknowledged to have influenced William Thompson — an Irish landowner, co-operator and Owenite socialist, to write a response to John Stuart Mill’s (1820) tract on the subjection of women, and his dismissal for political rights for women. Although acknowledged as a collaborator by Thompson, Wheeler was the silent partner and not formally named as author. The pamphlet was entitled *Appeal to one-half of the human race, women against the pretensions of the other half, men, to retain them in political and thence in civil and domestic slavery*. Thompson supported universal suffrage and full political and civil rights for women. He believed that co-operation was a means of overcoming the unequal distribution of wealth and was the means to achieving a “just society for all, but particularly to the benefit of workers and petit bourgeoisie” (Lane, 2010: 36). Lane, however, does suggest from a review of Thompson’s writings, that he was aware of his own class background — as were many of the aristocratic

and middle-class women co-operators of the time, and his advocacy of democracy “made him popular among working-class co-operators” (2010: 38).

Anna Wheeler was also a friend of Jeremy Bentham, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, the Saint Simonians and other social reformers (Pankhurst, 1954). Following the publication of the Appeal, she delivered a lecture of the Rights of Women, later published in the *British Co-operator* (1830), arguing for both “political and intellectual emancipation” (Rogers, 1994: 30).

Next in the portrait gallery is Lady Byron — born Annabelle Milbanke in 1792 (eleventh Baroness Wentworth), and who in 1815 married Lord Byron, the celebrated poet, only to separate from him a year later. Her impact through charitable works and working for reform is seen in her financial support for co-operative societies, her campaigns for education of girls and young women, and in supporting social causes. She purchased Red Lodge, which became a home for female offenders, run by Mary Carpenter. A friend of Harriet Beecher Stowe, she supported the establishment of an industrial and agricultural school and her daughter, Ada, worked with Charles Babbage and is credited with writing the world’s first computer programme (www.hullcc.gov.uk). Ada’s tutor was Dr William King, who shared Lady Byron’s interest in and support for co-operatives. His journal *The Co-operator* was published from 1828 to 1830 and encouraged many in the formation of co-operatives. The Rochdale Pioneers’ bound copy of the full run of issues is now in the National Co-operative Archive.

Sitting in the ‘women’s corner’, is Alice Acland (born 1849) who, when invited to edit a women’s section of *Co-operative News*, used the pages to appeal to women members:

What are men always urged to do when there is a meeting held at any place to encourage or to start co-operative institutions? Come! Help! Vote! Criticise! Act! What are women urged to do? “Come and Buy!” that is the limit of the special work pointed out to us women. We can be independent members of our store, but we are only asked to come and “buy” ... Spend our money at our own store we must, that is a matter of course; but our duty does not end here, nor our duty to our fellow creatures. To come and “buy” is all we can be asked to do; but cannot we go further ourselves? Why should not we have our meetings, our readings, our discussions? (Webb, 1927: 18).

The Women’s Corner began in the first issue of *Co-operative News* for 1883 and progress was rapid. The issue of 14 April of that year marked Acland’s new role as Secretary of the organisation that became known as the Women’s Co-operative Guild:

The Women’s League for the Spread of Co-operation has begun. All who wish to join should send in their names and addresses to Mrs Acland, Fyfield Road, Oxford (*Co-operative News*, 1883).

The Guild developed quickly and members were encouraged to put themselves forward for office within their co-operative societies and outside it. For many years, the Annual Reports included details of the number of members who were in elected positions outside the Guild:

As the Guild grew, courage increased. It was urged that the Guild meetings were different from “mothers’ meetings”, that women had public duties of every kind — that the Store was a training ground for citizenship for women as well as men (Davies, 1904: 32).

Another significant figure in the Women’s Guild is Catherine Webb (1859-1947), who became the first secretary of the Battersea branch of the Guild. She was a member of the Central Board of the Co-operative Union in addition to being one of the founders of the Southern Sectional Convalescent Fund and serving as its Secretary (Bellamy & Bing, 1974). She wrote journal articles, pamphlets and books. *The Woman with the Basket* told the story of the Women’s Guild up to 1927 (Webb, 1927) building on Margaret Llewelyn Davies’ *The Women’s Co-operative Guild 1883-1904* (Davies, 1904) which was published to celebrate the ‘coming of age’ of the Guild at 21.

Catherine Webb edited *Industrial Co-operation: The Story of a Peaceful Revolution* for the Co-operative Union, a book that was frequently updated and republished and was used as a text book for many of the education courses run by the Co-operative Union (Webb, 1904). Another of her books used as a teaching text during the first half of the twentieth century —

particularly for young co-operators — was *Lives of Great Men and Women: short biographies of some heroes and friends of co-operation*, people she described in her introduction as “pioneers and reformers, who lived at a time when the people had very little freedom or power” (Webb, 1937). The ‘lives’ in editions published in the 1930s included Elizabeth Fry, Harriet Martineau and Margaret McMillan. In addition, she campaigned — albeit unsuccessfully — for co-operative societies to set up laundries and wash-houses and kitchens to support women.

The growth of the Women’s Guild is often closely associated with the work of Margaret Llewelyn Davies who also helped to found the International Women’s Guild. In 1922, she became the first women president of the Co-operative Congress as well as being awarded the Freedom of the Guild. Davies was educated at Cambridge University and came from a Christian Socialist background. For almost twenty years, the Guild’s headquarters was with Davies and her deputy Lilian Harris in a room in her father’s vicarage — the Rev John Llewelyn Davies of St Mary’s Church in Kirkby Lonsdale in Westmorland.

The Guild’s campaigns included: a minimum wage for women co-operative employees (which was achieved in 1912); women’s activity in public life; divorce reform; suffrage; and maternity, ante-natal and post-natal care. The Guild carried out a sustained campaign — *The National Care of Maternity* — to demand improvements in the care available to working class women. It asked its members about their experiences to use in the campaign and in 1915, Davies edited more than 400 letters into *Maternity: letters from working women* (Davies, 1915). In his preface, The Right Hon Herbert Samuel MP said:

These letters give an intimate picture of the difficulties, the troubles, often the miseries, sometimes the agonies that afflict many millions of our people as a consequence of normal functions of their lives ... It is the first time, I believe, that the facts have been stated, not by medical men or social students, but by the sufferers themselves, in their own words” (Davies, 1915: v)

The book has been reprinted several times, most recently by Virago as *No one but a woman knows: Stories of motherhood before the war* in 2015.

Davies went on to declare “Why I believe in the ‘No more war’ movement” in her role as chair of the Society for Cultural relations with the USSR. Her work with the Women’s Co-operative Guild went on, even after her official retirement in 1921, to include *Life as We Have Known It: by co-operative working women* also reissued by Virago in 2015. This was another collection of letters, edited by Davies, this time designed to show the part that co-operation and the co-operative movement played in the lives of individuals:

Trade unionism and co-operation are woven into the very fabric of the workers’ lives. Trade Unionists stretch the warp of a decent living wage. Co-operators thread the woof of intelligent spending on their own manufactured goods, thus gaining control of industry by the people for the people (Davies, 1931: introduction).

The introductory letter by Virginia Woolf details her experience of the Guild 17 years earlier and how the Guild has developed, ending:

These pages are only fragments. These voices are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech. These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity. To express even what is expressed here has been a work of labour and difficulty. The writing has been done in kitchens, at odds and ends of leisure, in the midst of distractions and obstacles — but really there is no need for me, in a letter addressed to you, to lay stress upon the hardship of working women’s lives. Have not you and Lilian Harris given your best years ... (Davies, 1931: introductory letter).

Davies provided inspiration for many other women, including Mrs Layton (born 1855) who joined her local Guild and having been elected onto the management committee was to represent her branch at the Co-operative Union Congress. She is acknowledged to be one of the first women to buy and own her own home through the Co-operative Building Society, although was said to have admitted her husband’s disapproval at her disrespectful act (Gualitieri, 2012). Gualitieri further outlines the reactions received by women — members of the Guild — who struggled against the patriarchal attitudes of the wider co-operative movement, and within the

Co-operative Wholesale society where, the example of Mrs Scott is given. Mrs Scott was one of the few women elected to office within the Society and is said to have received abuse from other members of the Society for “having dared to stand” (2012: 187).

Stuttard also provides short biographies of women politicians — Margaret Bondfield and Caroline Ganley. Bondfield (born 1873) found her political footing in the trade union movement where she was a founder of the National Union of Shop Assistants. She became a cabinet minister and an active member of the Standing Joint Committee of the Women’s Industrial Organisations. Ganley’s (1879-1966) political roots came from the suffrage movement, the Women’s Labour League and the International League for Peace and Freedom. By 1919, she had come a borough councillor (Battersea) where she continued to campaign on issues relevant to women. By 1945, she was MP for Battersea South as well as the first woman to become president of the London Co-operative Society.

There’s also a glimpse at international co-operation with the inclusion of Austrian social democrat and co-operator, Emmy Freundlich. Freundlich (nee Koegler, born 1878) became the first president of the International Women’s Guild (1921) and was the only woman delegate to the 1928 League of Nations committee. She campaigned alongside International Guild secretary, and pacifist, Honora Enfield (born 1882 in Nottingham), and was arrested in Austria in 1934. She died in Paris in 1935 while working to establish a French Women’s Co-operative Guild (Bing, 1972).

A noted suffragist, Alice Hawkins, became involved in the co-operative movement through her employment at the Leicester Co-operative Boot and Shoe factory. Unusual for the time, was the existence of a branch of the Women’s Co-operative Guild in the factory, as Stuttard tells us that most had been associated with retail societies. Another notable suffragette featured in the booklet is Sylvia Pankhurst, (1882-1960) who set up a toy making co-operative factory to employ women.

Moving into the twentieth century, there is a women’s hand in the first Irish credit unions. Nora Herlihy (born 1910) was a teacher who helped to create employment in worker co-operatives through the Dublin Central Co-operative Society. She later became secretary of the Irish League of Credit Unions from its inception until 1966.

The widespread influence of women in a variety of fields and sectors including commercial and political spheres is positively highlighted in this booklet. Another key area is in writing and journalism. Here, Stuttard introduces us to Annie Bamford Tomlinson (1870-1933) who founded *Women’s Outlook* as well as founding and editing a co-operative magazine for young people, called *Our Circle* and a series of books for smaller children called ‘Sunshine Stories’. A later editor of the co-operative magazines was Mary Stott (1907). Stott became a journalist for *Co-operative News* before becoming the first editor of the Guardian newspaper’s women’s page. Following in Stott’s footsteps was Lily Howe (1932-2011) who became the first, and to date only, female editor of *Co-operative News*. Another first for Lily Howe was to become a board member of the Co-operative Development Agency.

Writing about her vision of a co-operative future in 1995, Katarin Apelqvist bemoans a situation where women constitute half of humankind and continue to be subordinated to the needs and rights of men. She sees the potential of co-operatives as a microcosm of democratic society and suggests that co-operative values and principles focus attention on the need for feminine and co-operative actions that enact human rights, equity and inclusive participation.

In 2105, we still need to heed these words as is demonstrated by the ILO report featured in this issue. Even so, there are strong and inspiring examples of women and co-operation — from coffee co-operatives in Rwanda (Ya-Bititi et al, 2012), agricultural co-operatives in eastern and southern Africa (ILO, 2012) to Ela Bhatt, a labour lawyer and founder of the SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association) Co-operative bank (www.sewa.org) — who, amongst other awards — was selected for the 2011 Indira Ghandi award for Peace, Disarmament and Development, and awarded the Radcliffe Institute medal by Harvard University in the same year

(www.indiancooperative.com). All of which serve to emphasise women's role and contribution to co-operation and social development.

The Authors

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